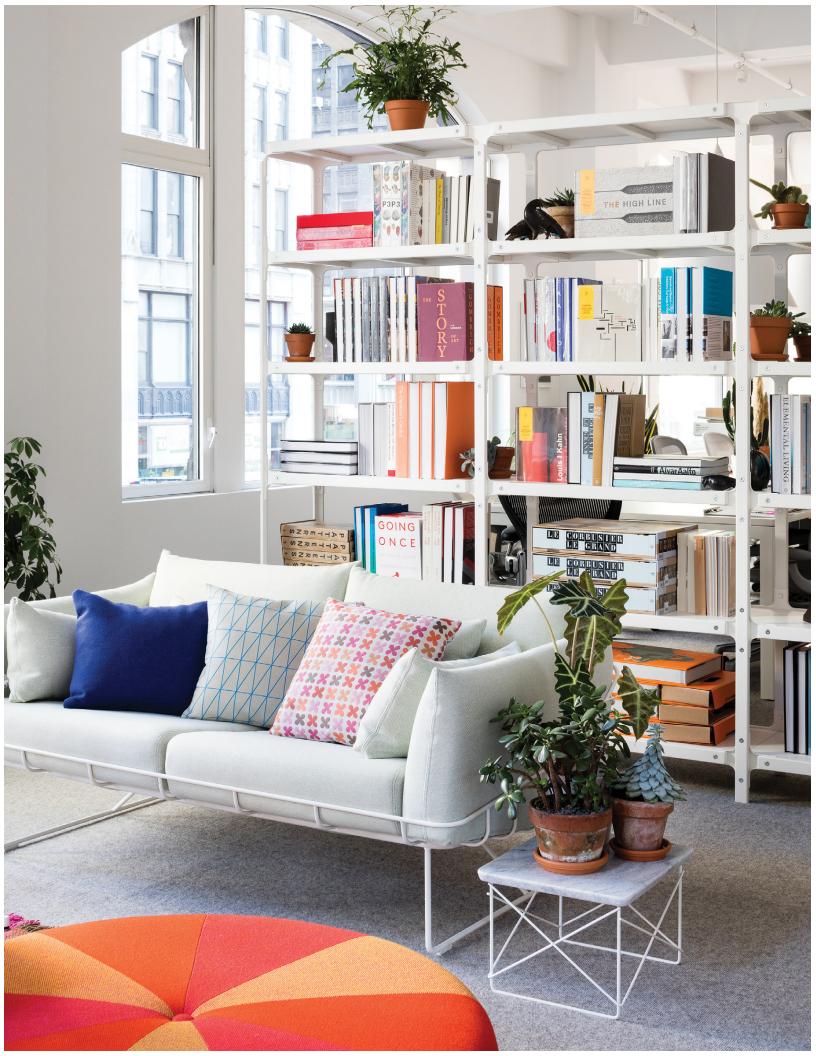# Workplaces

CREATING CULTURAL CAPITAL:

EXPLORING THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THIRD SPACE DESIGN AND UNDERSTANDING ITS REAL PURPOSE

by Emily Clingman

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As workplace design evolves, trends and philosophies develop with more clarity. Ideas borrowed from other industries and time eras are increasingly adapted to fit into contemporary corporate design standards. One such concept — third space design — is being redefined within the workplace design space.

Third space design originated as an urban planning element. As anchors of community life, third spaces (or third places) are open to the public, facilitate connection to others and provide a sense of identity and belonging to the community — a city park, the library, a coffee shop, a memorial plaza, the corner bar. Ray Oldenburg, author of the book "The Great Good Place," describes third spaces as neutral ground. Third places put no importance on an individual's status in a society, allowing for a sense of commonality among its occupants.

Michael Arad, designer of the 9/11 Memorial Plaza, talks about the need to come together in public spaces. In a "Design Matters" podcast interview in 2013, Arad says public spaces not only bring people together physically, but emotionally as well.
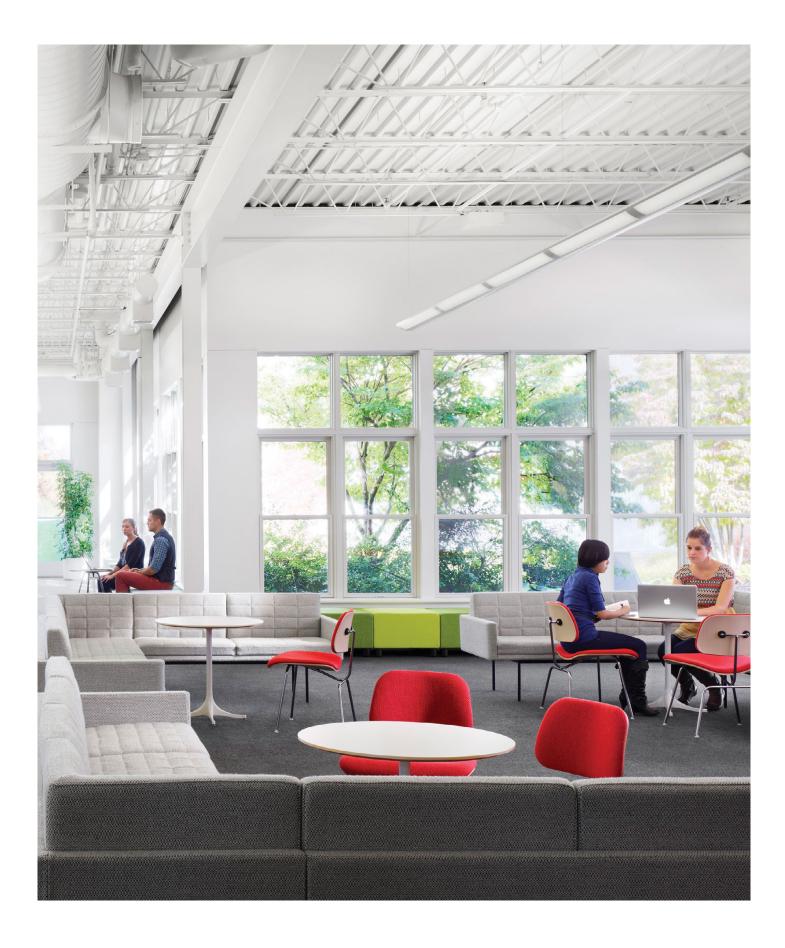
"These places on a normal day, are where the farmers market is, the place where the kids skateboard and people walk through with their kids, but in a difficult moment, like the 9/11 attacks, these are the places we come together,"

he says. "The space allows us to lean on one another."

Arad says public places have a social role to play, a place that reflects the values in society and also reinforces them, resulting in a sense of democratic value that the space and emotions are shared.

This third space idea made its way into current workplace design but somewhere along the line, the concept lost its depth. Open concept floor designs, ancillary spaces and common areas became … well, common. They lacked meaning and were hastily designed. Dissenting voices emerged, and the third space got a bad rap.

"Articles pop up every year, usually along the lines of how the open office is killing the soul of your organization," says Joseph White, director of Workplace Design Strategy and Management at Herman Miller. "This argument is almost always founded on the notion that it's one or the other — either a barren, open landscape or everyone … individually isolated in their perfectly contained little cube."
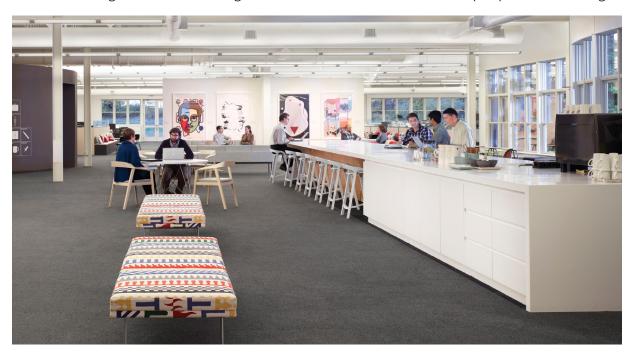
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White explains people are not binary, and environments should not be binary either. Terming something a third space actually perpetuates that mentality, he says, adding, "It's an overly simplistic way of how an environment can support people and what the space is trying to do."

Herman Miller views the work environment as one continuous experience — The Living Office. Isolating one aspect or one area disconnects the flow. Each space is all part of the experience of work. Ancillary furnishings, White explains, implies they are off to the side, not integrated, not very important.

"In reality, these spaces are extremely important for both experience and outcome at work," White says.

Building from that understanding, Herman Miller's point of view around work is that it should be aligned to who a company is uniquely and what it is the company does, and third spaces or ancillary spaces — if they must be named — should support that.

"These types of environments do a lot to help to build a collective identity within an organization," White says. "Correlating with the urban concept of third spaces, they are great spots for people to reconnect with the purpose of an organization. So, they are very important in that regard."

How can a physical space grow and nurture a philosophical idea, such as the identity of a company?
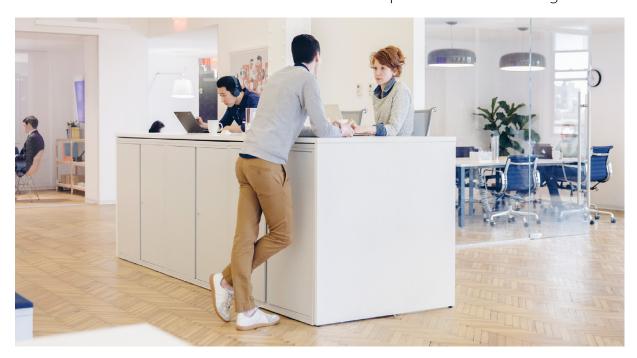
"What you shouldn't do, which is actually what people gravitate toward first, is wrap it up in your brand colors, the logo or something very obvious," White says. "Think deeper and more symbolic, like in

urban planning — civic plazas or parks."

White went on to explain that often components within public spaces make it very clear where one is, and there's a very strong sense of place. He noted Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park and Philip Hart Plaza in Detroit as examples. Hart Plaza features a sculpture of the city's founder Antoine Laumet de La Mothe, sieur de Cadillac; the Gateway to Freedom International Memorial to the

setting, this is a place where it's important to have those cultural touchstones to remind people of the purpose of the organization, the history, the aspirations, things that speak to the day-to-day activities — what do people do there, what is the nature of their work?"

White suggests symbolic and thought-provoking representations, displayed in a way they can feel and read, with much more sophistication than a logo on the

Underground Railroad commemorates Detroit's role in the movement; and several other memorial items represent Detroit's history and connection to water and steel.

"Many other examples around the world of monuments or cornerstones that remind people where they are and what the significance of the place they are standing," White says. "In a corporate

wall or block text of a mission statement. This allows each individual to form their own relationship with the company's story. When people come to these spaces, they mix with others and begin to share their own stories.

"That's when you start to see growth in culture in a very living way," White says.

Using Herman Miller's own example, White describes a common area that

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implements third space elements. Adjacent to the front entrance of the company's headquarters, lies an area called, "The Front Door." People naturally gravitate there because of the coffee bar, but there are meaningful components that draw them in further.

The Nelson Room, named after George Nelson, who was a pivotal figure in Herman Miller's development, features photos of Nelson and other key founders and designers arranged on the walls. Also on display are artifacts linked to those individuals — Alexander Girard-designed pillows made from his textiles, for example. There's a plaza area which is part working environment, part showroom, featuring Herman Miller seating over the years. There's also a library full of books relating to all aspects of design, from graphic to industrial, textiles and printmaking.

"That speaks to our comprehensive approach and the value we place on research and learning," White says. "These are a few examples of things that are intentionally placed for not only employees, but also visitors, and they can get a sense of what we're all about."

Introspection is very important when designing a space to relate to a company's identity and what it does, according to White.

"Who you are can be a very deep and forgotten question," he says. "Some people just don't have the patience for that. But it's actually really important to understand that deeply. It's the only way you can bring forward these very nuanced manifestations of your purpose."

When it comes to design flow and user friendliness, it's up to employees to individually participate in the process. Design professionals know how to create purposeful spaces based on the organization's mission and what it's trying

to do, but individuals need to be aware of their own personal needs and how an environment can meet those needs.

Traditionally, a person's primary outlet for personal expression has been their desk. In this new landscape at work, there's a greater variety. If designed well, personalization comes through the experience, not so much one's desk items. Comparing it to purposeful urban design, people find paths they love to walk through the city, whether it's to a park or stopping by the same coffee shop each morning.

"You build an intimate relationship with your city with how you navigate through it," White says. "You love how the sunlight comes through this one particular angle at a particular time of day, for instance."

This can happen in a well-designed work place. Experiential paths through work might be finding the perfect quiet spot in the morning to have coffee and check your email or your favorite spot by the window to get refocused after lunch.

"Those start to form some pretty nice moments for individuals and they learn how to shape their own experience to achieve their objective," White says.

This is not just about plopping some sofas around. These spaces, because they are a work environment, have a double duty.

"A sofa and a lamp might get you part of the way, but it won't have the greatest impact," White says. "If you don't have the time for the introspection and just put in something that replicates a Pinterest photo, it will probably be OK, and is better than nothing, but you're probably missing out on a huge opportunity to build some cultural capital within your organization." **WPM**